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A Feminist Political-Economy Narrative Against Austerity

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Abstract: These notes offer a feminist reflection on austerity as an aggressive neoliberal policy based on principles of faith in neoclassical economics and having dramatic social effects on living conditions and a disastrous regressive influence on the distribution of incomes and equality. The focus is on how to use a feminist perspective to introduce a change in the narrative based on women's experiential knowledge of human vulnerability, caring relationships, and unpaid domestic work. This narrative change requires a political subject capable of shifting power relationships and willing to do so, and also a sound theory that can bring to the surface structural connections and tensions in the economic system, including those inherent in the capitalist production and social reproduction relationship. The transnational political feminism is presented here as a subject of perspective. With regard to theory, we propose combination of the classical macro-founded surplus approach, reappraised by Piero Sraffa, and of the Smithian micro capability approach developed by Amartya Sen. Both approaches explicitly challenge the neoclassical paradigm. The surplus approach does it with regard to functional distribution (set at the institutional and political level), and the capability approach does it with regard to a multidimensional individual, embedded in a social context. Both approaches are extended to include the fact that the responsibility of adapting real lives to profit and financial rent falls increasingly on women's shoulders, discharged into the household.

Keywords: austerity; distribution; feminism; social reproduction; vulnerability; well-being

POLITICAL SUBJECTS, NARRATIVES, AND ACTION

At present, the social and ethical aspects of the economic system are in a state of confusion with regard to concepts, policy, and position in the analytical frame. Part of the problem arises from the fact that mainstream economics, on the one hand, at the macro level, does not take into account the processes of social reproduction that enable real people to live, work, and relate to one another in society; on the other hand, at the micro level, it has a very reductive idea of the individual: neutral, selfish, "autistic," disembodied and disembedded from context.

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Mainstream economists talk, with difficulty, about interpersonal utility comparisons and not of real interpersonal relationships, of relational goods but not of relational individuals responsible for their own and other people's vulnerable lives. Their difficulties are essentially methodological: built into the axioms on which utility functions are constructed and into the adjustment mechanics of equilibrium whereby bodies, conventional necessities, norms, power relationships, and personal responsibilities can only be seen as rigidities in a competitive labor market, thus, exceptions to the general analytical frame.

While the medical professions have acknowledged the influence of social determinants on health (Marmot 2012), economists still have difficulties taking into proper analytical account male and female bodies, necessarily situated in time and place. But what is hidden in theory becomes cogent in policy, because living human bodies do not disappear and if they are not provided for, they will eventually demand to be dealt with, usually at higher monetary and social costs.

At the level of the European Union (EU), fiscal austerity is assumed to be the golden policy for coping with the present structural crisis. This European form of Structural Adjustments has major regressive effects on the distribution of incomes and a dramatic effect on the living conditions of large masses of women and men, as has already been demonstrated by experiments in other areas of the world. A neoliberal narrative of distrust of the state and fundamentalist faith in the market (Hirschman 2001 [1996]), is used to cover the disastrous effects of ongoing privatization, the dismantling of public services, dispossession of rights and commons, sale of public assets, financial speculation in housing, health, and education. Together, these measures lead to the increased destitution, poverty, and insecurity of large segments of the population with evident effects on gender inequalities present in any social group given its historical context.[1]

Austerity is by no means class and gender neutral: since the late 1970s, it appears to be more and more a weapon of attack in a class war waged by financial rentiers and profit holders, backed by governments, against the laboring population in terms of wages, security, social services (education, health, transport, etc.), and urban development. It has taken what the laboring classes had gained in previous decades in terms of security of employment, social wages, rights to universal health care and education, public housing, transport, and so on. Political measures have been taken to counteract the international wave of political action by workers, students, and, last but not least, women, in the late 1960s and early 1970s questioning the sexual division of labor inside and outside the household.

The regressive redistributive influence of austerity and its nineteenth-century social rhetoric of deserving and undeserving people, will not end until effective counteractions are taken; to do so, new plausible and persuasive narratives are needed to open the ground for possible transformative perspectives. Narratives and actions stem from political subjects effectively engaged in the process of change, capable of *revealing* what is hidden, *connecting* what is separate, *expanding* what is reductive, and finally, *denouncing* what is false. The interactive combination of action and narrative is necessary to identify a new ground for social confrontation that sets vision, focus, and objectives.

These rough notes are an attempt to position some key analytical and political issues in the austerity debate, by opening the analytical frame to complexity and social tensions: connecting structural processes, institutional levels, sexed individuals and society, personal and social relations, public and private spheres, productive and reproductive sectors. In so doing, I take

women and, more precisely, the transnational feminist movement, as political agents potentially capable of shifting the perspective, the ground of confrontation, and the very object of the social struggle. It is a widespread, heterogeneous, pragmatic movement that questions the idea of sex-neutral individuals and struggles for the integrity of women's bodies, dignity, autonomy, equal access to resources, and the sustainability of livelihood and the environment. For women, these are liberating struggles, and they could be liberating for men too, were they prepared to take their own human vulnerability into the public space, rather than hiding it in domestic intimacy, to be cured with "feminine" care.[2]

Feminists are bearers of new narratives that use a powerful experiential knowledge of human vulnerability and of the material and emotional complexity of males and females. In different ways and with different degrees of radicalism, they focus their political attention on the point of connection between daily lives and the capitalist economy based on the wage-labor market. Doing so not only makes visible the gender inequalities that are usually overlooked but also reveals the structural relationships between capitalist production and social reproduction at the core of the capitalist system, together with its recurrent restructuring by processes of dispossession of the means of subsistence, thereby deploying specific attacks against women.[3]

The feminist perspective has removed the veil that keeps the *oikos* separate and hidden from the productive and public realm. Once the veil has been lifted, appearing out of the shadow is an enormous amount of unpaid domestic and care work, which at the macro level is larger than the aggregate of total paid work.[4] This major aggregate still needs a proper location in economic analysis.

Counting unpaid work plays a major analytical role because time-use surveys provide data at the international level that reveal the dimensions and very unequal gender distribution of this unpaid work.[5] In their anthropological variety and persistence, these inequalities indicate the growing need for deeper exploration to capture not only the striking quantity of unpaid reproductive work and its unequal gender distribution but also the relevance of its qualitative characteristics, which bring into the main picture of the economic system sexual relations, caring responsibilities, vulnerable bodies, and the structural process that enables men and women to live, work, and relate to one another in a given social context.[6]

Yet, unless we want to treat time-use surveys simply as a monument to women's self-sacrifice, we also need a narrative that allows us to make connections with other aggregates, with the structural features of the economic system, and to grasp the very nature of the capitalist system of provisioning and its relation to the social reproduction of real women and men.

Feminist economists have proposed new extended frames of the economic system that include unpaid domestic and care work at the macro level, as a social infrastructure, among the costs of social reproduction that together with public services (health care, education, etc.) and paid domestic and care work, enable women and men to live, work, reproduce the next generations, and face their personal responsibilities for dependent family members (Bakker 1998, 2007; Beneria 2003; Carrasco 1991; Elson 1991; Elson and Cagatay 2000; Folbre 1994; Himmelweit 2007; Picchio 1981, 1992, 2003).

Unpaid domestic and care work lead us to the very place where personal and social tensions collide, this work being self-controlled by the responsibility of adapting (or trying to adapt) the lives of family members to the effective distribution of resources and the modes of production. This tension has historically been a women's problem, but is not essentially a specific women's question because it is rooted in a structural conflict between the material and relational quality of living conditions and the capitalist modes of production (Picchio 1996).

Narratives need sound analytical frames to indicate how different parts of the system are effectively connected, which include the conditions of its sustainability in time and, not least, how to avoid illusions and reductionism. In the design of a new analytical frame, both the history of economic thought and economic social history are precious guides because they enable us to reflect on recurrent problems and feasible tools.

In defining the process of social reproduction as part of the economic structure, the feminist macro-extended approach acknowledges women's social experience of personal and social necessities and the increasingly difficult and basically impossible reconciliation between people's well-being and the capitalist labor market. The tension between lives and capitalism is part of a specific contradiction. On the one hand, the system needs high quality human capital, and on the other hand, it requires controlled and subdued laborers with no power for self-determination. This contradictory trend is particularly true in a service economy that produces information, networks, health, knowledge, caring, and imagination for the market, and that does so by using the knowledge, relations, reliability, care, and imagination of real people. In the global labor market, workers' complexity is the new capital, and thus their capabilities must be formed and sustained over time, starting with the domestic reproductive process (Bakker and Gill 2003). The structural tensions between production for profit and effective well-being are internalized in anxieties—in self-destructive and often violent passions.

The experience of domestic and care work is in fact ambivalent: free and commanded, rewarding and alienating (Folbre 1995). In the domestic space, tensions have difficulty finding expression and can be internalized in physical uneasiness and depression, which, combined with fatigue, have lifelong negative effects on women's health and well-being. The tensions are, in fact, caused by the effort to change the sense of social reproduction at the household level: at the macro level, lives are seen as human capital, that is, as means of production for profit; at the household level, they are expected to be transformed into effective well-being. The difference lies in being means of production or being independent and flourishing human beings. The risk for women is that of being used as means of reproduction in both cases.

Time-use statistics of care and domestic unpaid work take us inside everyday life, where the complexity of human individuals is experienced in its physical and emotional vulnerability. It is not only a problem of caring for vulnerable infants and a frail aging population but also for vulnerable adults, first of all adult men who in the public space hide their normal vulnerability and discharge it in the intimacy of the domestic space, onto women's shoulders. This can happen also in the case of men sharing housework and responsibilities more equally, but still keeping their vulnerability as a personal, intimate question, and not as a public, structural fundamental issue to be acknowledged in its normality in the public political sphere.

It is precisely within this tangle of vulnerability, command, work, livelihood, exploitation, insecurity, and freedom that unpaid domestic and care work is positioned: at the core of the capitalist system, where different spheres and aspects of production and social reproduction cross and conflict in an economy motivated by profit and in a household still pervaded by patriarchal illusions of infinitely self-sacrificing women, and endangered by male confusion between the real strength required to master one's own life and the exercise of power over women.

Moreover, in the present situation of ethical crisis engulfing people's lives, it should be imperative to trace the whole ethical chain connecting the irresponsibility of financial speculators and policy makers to the depth of women's final responsibility for the quality of life of their

family members. In recent decades, the weight of this responsibility has been increasing: the aggressive greed and irresponsibility of financial operators, the deterioration of labor regimes, and the persistent attacks on welfare states and the environment, have shifted the risks of daily life increasingly onto the individual. In this context, caring becomes a crucial political issue, but we need a coherent theory to illuminate its features.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION: A THEORETICAL CHALLENGE

The present crisis requires greater clarity and a sharper perspective to see its real and social dynamics beneath the surface of financial events. Too much is missing in the general picture and what is missing is much too important for our lives and for the sustainability of the system as a whole to be ignored or not properly connected to the core of the analytical frame. National and international financial technocracy imposes priorities and urgencies and indicates unfeasible short-term fixes that lead to long-term disasters. To escape from the trap of neoliberal ideologies that force possible solutions onto highly dangerous paths and to the use of destructive practices, we need to isolate the different layers of the economic system and connect them to their structural functions, thus disclosing institutional and social power relationships that can and must be changed.

New narratives require appropriate analytical frames that indicate how different parts are connected in the real world, what the long-term conditions are for the system's sustainability, and also how to escape illusions, reductionism, and deceit. This means that to design an effective analytical frame both the history of economic thought and socioeconomic history are necessary because they help us to reflect on the methodological link between real problems, analytical tools and policy.

Including the process of social reproduction among the structural processes, rendering unpaid work visible, and recognizing its culture and life ethics, make the sustainability of the system of production, distribution, and exchange of means much more complex and dialectical—that is, open and not deterministic.

In the wide variety of heterodox economic narratives circulating at present, most of them, including those of Joseph Stiglitz and Thomas Piketty, are critical of austerity but from within the neoclassical paradigm. Two separate toolboxes can shift the paradigm, thus opening in different ways a space that can be partly used to conceptualize the real-life experience of concrete women and men: the first proposed by Piero Sraffa, and the second by Amartya Sen. Each contains a destructive critique of the neoclassical paradigm: Saffra's theory of relative prices and distribution; Sen's total utility as a feasible metric of individual and social welfare. In this article, we work on both the critical perspectives and the analytical concepts used by these two authors that get us closer to the lives of real men and women: classical subsistence wages and individual multidimensional effective well-being. These concepts are placed in two different analytical frameworks: (1) the classical political economy macro-founded surplus approach (Francois Quesnay, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Karl Marx, and Sraffa); and (2) the capabilities approach advanced by Sen and Martha Nussbaum, built on the classical Greek tradition of philosophical practical reasoning on "how we should live."

In different ways, both frame works open a space for the material and moral quality of living at the core of economic analysis: the surplus approach places "subsistence wages," measured by the indicator of a list of "conventional necessaries" in a central position in the analysis of

capital, of functional class distribution, and the determination of relative prices; the capabilities approach shifts the analytical focus from the production and exchange of means (commodities) to the process of a good living for different individuals, defined by multiple dimensions (a set of valuable doings and beings), and active in specific moral, social, territorial, and historical contexts.[7]

In both frames, if acknowledged in the public sphere, the unpaid work of social reproduction could play a fundamental role: in the classical surplus approach, in the process of enabling laborers to work and reproduce as human capital; in the well-being approach, in expanding the capabilities and functionings of free individuals. Some space exists in both frames for including women's struggles. In the macro surplus approach, they could be located in the Marxian dialectical difference between the value of commodities produced by wage labor and the value of labor as a commodity itself, or, better, male and female laborers as free human beings (Dalla Costa and James 1973; James 1975). In the capability approach, women can be seen as agents exercising the liberty of freely "composing" their multidimensional lives in both the public and private spheres, assessing priorities and equally sharing responsibilities and accessing resources (Nussbaum 2002).

As we have seen, the major challenge we must confront is to find analytical tools that are sufficiently open and rigorous to be capable of embracing the complexity of multilayered structural processes, multidimensional individuals, and fragmented societies. In this respect both Sraffa and Sen offer a dialectical space that could take us further in our quest for a viable analytical narrative capable of holding the (political and sentimental) materialism of human animals, situated in time and place.

In the classical theory of institutional distribution, reproposed by Sraffa, the concept of a normal wage that reflects the conventional costs of the social reproduction of labor plays a key role, and its anthropological, historical, and political content marks the surplus-approach methodology, along the foundations of Smith's historical and moral analysis of the production–social reproduction relationship, shared in its richness also by Marx (Eatwell 2012; Picchio 1992, 2015).

Sraffa, in his specific and clearly focused effort to correct Ricardo's error in the measurement of the rate of profit, introduces a system of relative prices that completely bypasses the assumptions of the marginalist theory of prices and distribution—variations at the margin, the equilibrium of supply and demand, continuous price–quantity functions, inverse relations between productivity and quantity of production factors, and substitution at the margin between the so-called production factors themselves—although he does accept, for higher comparative clarity, the heroic hypotheses of perfect competition and uniformity of the rate of profit (Sraffa 1960).[8] Not only in particular cases but also regarding the general framework, Sraffa breaks the traditional link, also widely used by progressive economists, between wages and productivity. He makes it possible to bring to light a normal, structural, institutional conflict between the propertied classes (profit holders and rentiers) and the living conditions of the working population.[9] In fact, this is precisely what we are observing in the ongoing years of neoliberal austerity.

Sen's criticism forcefully poses the problem of human complexity and liberty—central questions, indeed, for both individual and collective well-being. His approach, based on the works of Smith, and to some extent, of Marx, places quality of life at the center of the analytical scene, defined on the basis of individual multidimensionality, responsible relationships, and the

freedom to dynamically compose the dimensions of one's own life (Sen 1987a). This perspective assigns to means (commodities, goods, and services) their proper instrumental role. Moreover, by basing its method on the differences between individuals defined by a set of physical, cognitive, and relational dimensions, it also recognizes individual differences in the process of converting means into states of effective well-being.[10] Sen stresses the importance of the break between his approach and the utilitarian theory of welfare. This break is clear with regard to the measurement of total utility as a sum, maximizing rationality founded on axiomatic logic, and the assumption of a given order of preferences (Sen 1987b).

Finally, Sen rescues Smith from overly reductive and mechanical readings (Sen 1987a, 2010). Starting from the roots of classical philosophy, he defines a new standpoint from which to evaluate social justice with regard to poverty, exclusion, and inequality, posing the question that must precede any redistributive action: "Equal in what?" To this, we think, we must add the feminist questions: "Equality of whom?" and "Defined by whom?"

CONCLUSIONS

Classical political economists were policy-oriented and the aim of their philosophical and analytical speculations regarding a commercial society based on the production of a surplus was to answer the question: what, whom, and when to tax? The answer was: rent, rentiers, after the surplus had been produced; moreover, as clearly stated by Smith and Ricardo, not taxes on wages such as to compromise the acquisition of such conventional necessaries that enable men and women to work and live in society "without shame." Finally, within the surplus, effectively produced and objectively measurable, profit and rent were not seen as additions to the product but as residual incomes after wages, the real costs of social reproduction deriving from habits, customs, and class power, had been paid.

Their method was inductive and based on practical reasoning that responded to contexts and real processes, and always kept in mind that laborers as "human animals" need real food, not an abstract subjective utility, to be able to work and repair the wear and tear of their daily activities. Society was segmented into social classes according to forms of access to income and the institutional distribution of the surplus produced; the markets for land, money, and labor were different according to their nature and historical institutions; also the processes of production, distribution, and exchange were all different and, more so, the process of social reproduction of flesh-and-blood civilized laborers and citizens.

This is a very powerful frame, paradigmatically different from the neoclassical economics on which neoliberal austerity is based. Its narrative is made even more powerful in our own day if we expand the notion of standards of living from a list of conventional commodities to a list of capabilities and functioning of free women and men embedded in social contexts and able to organize and act to transform them.

The scientific authority of the classical story of a capitalist commercial society, in its macro and micro foundation, requires extension to include the quantity and quality of the unpaid work of social reproduction with its ambivalences and complexity and, most of all, a new political subject entering into the drama. Nevertheless to change the plot of austerity, directed by a structurally unaccountable and corrupt class of financial rentiers and absentee shortsighted capitalists, we need a change of directors and actors who have the will and power to take the stage. We also need a

new public, ready to sympathize with fellow human beings, both men and women, aware of their shared human vulnerability, demanding a viable mixture of domestic, public, and common care, responsible and accountable institutions, and, last but not least, a "caring democracy."

NOTES

1. In these notes I do not offer any empirical information. On the gender effects of the crisis and its austerity policy, see the extensive analysis contained in UN Women (2014).

2. For a well-argued perspective on men's relationship to caring, see Tronto (2013:67–94).

3. On the specific attack against women's autonomy in the process of primitive accumulation of capital, see Federici (2004).

4. The United Nations conferences of the 1990s played a major role in offering a political space to the international and global women's movement. On the occasion of the conferences, the practice of social forums was introduced, imposed by grassroots groups. Within these events women's groups started to organize autonomous spaces, the first one being "Planeta femea" at the Earth Summit, Rio de Janeiro (June 3–14, 1992). At the Fourth UN Conference on Women, held in Beijing, September 1995, 30,000 women gathered at the social forum and managed to have a direct influence on the governments' negotiations. On the issue of counting unpaid domestic and care work, one of the hottest political issues during the negotiations, the international women's movement had a major role in the final drafting of the Platform of Action. We owe to that action the wealth of official statistics on time use now produced regularly by several countries.

5. A seminal work on counting unpaid domestic work was produced as a background paper of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 1995 Human Development Report by Luisella Goldschmidt-Clermont and Elisabetta Pagnossin-Alisakis (1996): 105–155.

6. The literature on time use and care work is impressive and fast growing, here I mention only Valeria Esquivel, Debbie Budlender, Nancy Folbre (2008). An insightful work on the present tensions inherent in the current restructuring of care is Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2010). On the whole, even the champions of heterodox academic economic debate on austerity ignore the issue. One exception, due to Sen's being a feminist economist, can be found in Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi (2009).

7. The bibliography on the capability approach is very vast; key works include Amartya Sen (1985, 1987a) and Martha Nussbaum (2002, 2003). See also Ingrid, Robeyns (2005) and Bina, Agarwal, Jane, Humphries and Robeyns (2003). An up-to-date and informed bibliography can be found at www.hd-ca.org.

8. For an important work on Sraffa and marginalism, based on Sraffa's unpublished papers, see Maria Cristina Marcuzzo and Annalisa Rosselli (2011).

9. In actual fact Sraffa, in his book Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities (1960) treats wages as net wages, paid at the end of the production process. For a discussion on Sraffa's theory of subsistence and net wages on the basis of his papers at the Wren Library in Cambridge, see Picchio (2010).

10. Sen's approach has merged into a coordinated collective effort, initiated by his late friend Mabub Ul Haq, who gave more attention to the applied analysis of human development undertaken by the UNDP, and in particular by the Human Development Report Office, which since 1990 has published annual reports. This tradition of the well-being approach is growing and producing important empirical work.

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